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Grounded in reality: How children make sense of the unreal

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ABSTRACT

In summarizing the nine articles comprising the Special Issue, Cognizing the Unreal, the editors make two major points. The first is that several articles show that children come to learn about what is real through their perceptions (particularly apparent in the articles by Markova & Legerstee, Goldstein & Bloom, Aguiar & Taylor, Gjersoe, Hall, & Hood, and Woolley & McInnis). Second, children's beliefs about what is real appear to be helped by their accessing underlying abstract structures and comparing these across domains, an idea supported by Shultman & Yoo, Corriveau & Harris, and Van Reet, Pinkham, & Lillard's articles, and given credence by Magid, Sheskin, & Shulz. This latter article proposes that the reason children pretend might be because it is a venue in which children learn to engage in cross-domain abstraction. The authors end with reflection on the cultural proclivity to give very young children fantasy. This proclivity might not serve children well, since (the articles suggest) it is through reality (both perceptions of and abstractions about reality) that children come to understand fantasy.

This Special Issue featured nine articles concerning children's cognizing of the unreal. Here we consider what conclusions we can draw from the set of articles regarding how children come to think about what is not true or real or perceptually accessible. Each of the articles addressed a unique facet of non-reality, and each uncovered meaningful developmental challenges and progressions in children's concepts.

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The first article, by Markova and Legerstee, explored how toddlers enter the realm of pretense, examining their pretend and imitative behaviors with their mothers and then with an experimenter, from 15 to 24 months of age. As in previous research, the authors found that pretending increases across this time period; interestingly, however, children's rate of imitation of pretense remained the same. Furthermore, maternal pretending predicted children's imitation of their mother's pretense. Hence when mothers pretend, children reenact her pretend actions, and they do so equally often at 15 months as at 24. This is perhaps not surprising. What is not at all obvious is their second main finding: Maternal imitation of children's pretense actions predicted children's pretending. This suggests that perhaps by mirroring back children's pretend actions, mothers encourage children's pretending more broadly. These findings highlight the mutual action dialog that leads to early pretending in (at least) Euro-American cultures, and thus provide a hint as to how children first enter the realm of the unreal.

When adults pretend in front of young children, those children need to figure out that the acts are not real. This challenge continues with exposure to acting. Acting is in a sense similar to pretend play, in that actors and observers engage in willing suspension of disbelief. Goldstein and Bloom asked when children come to realize that actors do not really feel the feelings and physical states that they portray. They found a development between ages 3 and 5 in coming to realize that human actors are not really experiencing the emotions and physical traits they portray. Yet across preschool, and unlike adults, children believed that people whose portrayals were very exaggerated were more likely to be actually experiencing the projected states. In other words, they believed in hyper-real conveyances. It will be interesting in further research to see when this belief in exaggerated portrays is corrected to align with adult beliefs.

Three other articles were also concerned with the basic issue of how children conceptualize "unreal" (virtual, inanimate, acted, or perceptually inaccessible) entities and behaviors. Aguiar and Taylor presented children with a virtual versus a stuffed dog, and had them indicate which one had specific properties. Interestingly, despite the fact that only the virtual dog appeared to move on its own, both entities were seen as equally agentive. However, the stuffed dog was particularly characterized by friendship and comfort, whereas the virtual one was particularly characterized by entertainment. Neither, interestingly, was viewed as educational. Virtual toys are rapidly gaining market share, and are designed to be educational and friend-like. How children actually conceptualize such entities as compared to other toys is important to understand and this article breaks new and potentially fertile ground in addressing this question.

Gjersoe, Hall, and Hood were also concerned with children's attribution of characteristics to inanimate creatures—in this case of mental states to toys. They found that children do not anthropomorphize indiscriminately; rather they attribute mental states more to their attachment objects than to other favorite toys. This is especially the case when those objects have faces, but interestingly even "blankies" were seen to have mental states more so than other favorite toys.

The fourth manuscript to deal with how children conceptualize unreal things zeroed in on an important contrast: what is merely invisible rather than truly unreal. Invisibility is a property common to many fantastical entities, and to some very important real ones as well (germs, neutrinos). Woolley and McInnis addressed how children conceive of invisibility in both real and in not-real entities. They found that a basic aspect of children's cognitive development, the ability to make the appearance-reality distinction, is related to understanding invisibility. Young children's concepts of visibility and reality status were intertwined at first, and gradually became disentangled between ages 3 and 7.

Taken together, one suggestion from the articles discussed thus far is that perception plays a very important role in children's coming to understand what is not real. Observing their mother's imitation furthers children's own pretense; the cuddly stuffed animal that one can hold (unlike the animated virtual character) can be a friend; and the findings that "seeing is believing" and that knowing that appearances can be deceiving both predict understanding invisibility. In stark contrast to this are two findings showing misunderstanding. Gjersoe and colleagues' showed that young children believe their attachment objects, especially those with faces, have mental states. Goldstein and Bloom reported that all preschoolers (unlike adults) think exaggerated actors are more likely to be truly experiencing their projected states than are more realistic ones. Perceptual information in these instances leads children astray; the strength of the accented characteristics leads children to think people are actually